

carnivores, there's a "coal shed" corner offering steak as sanguine or scorched as you like. But why would you?

Start with cocktails. The bar manager, Alex Palumbo, ex of Hakkasan and Zuma, is genius. His winter negroni, featuring Campari spiked with cacao nibs and served with dark chocolate shavings, shouldn't work, but does. The Seven Dials celebrates Brighton's busiest roundabout in a sophisticated blend of amontillado sherry, Rittenhouse Rye and Dubonnet. I may have had two of these, offset by a handful of salt cod fritters dunked in smoked cod's roe.

My starter made me smile — a bright orange slice of autumn pumpkin scattered with dainty wild mushrooms and tiny cubes of deep-fried blue cheese. Potential pappiness was deftly offset by a granola sprinkling featuring seeds from that very pumpkin. My dining partner chose pork cheek, pork noodles and turnip tea. Her cheek was a bit tonguey and she found only one (admittedly very long) noodle. The turnip tea was pure umami.

That night, Storm Barney was blowing, so we shared the fish pie. A high-risk strategy, because I make an epic one (don't we all). It arrived with a giant prawn poking out the top of a sea of perfectly piped Marcel waves of mash. Not waving but drowning, it turned out. Inside were discernible chunks of monkfish, luxurious scallop slices and just enough non-luminous smoked haddock. Sadly, sauce and mash had become one, creating a starchy pond. An accident of timing rather than design.

Pudding so often doesn't justify the calories. Not here. Intrigued, I tried the soya milk-skin dumpling: a chewy lactic-licious delight hidden beneath a drift of dried milk flakes. My dining partner shuddered at this Singing Detective dessert. This only made me love it more. A Taste of the Pier is an Instagrammable ironic spectacle. Ooh, candyfloss! Dirty little doughnuts are a guilty pleasure. Tiny ice creams! I forgive them serving it on a plank, because it's salvaged from the West Pier. All the fun of the fair!

Brighton, finally, has its fine-dining fix. Oh, you will like to be beside this seaside ■

AA Gill returns next week

#### The Salt Room, Brighton

106 King's Road BN1 2FU; 01273 929488,  
saltroom-restaurant.co.uk.  
Mon-Sun: noon-4pm; 6pm-10pm  
(10.30pm Fri and Sat)

#### SECOND HELPINGS

#### THREE OF THE BEST SEAFOOD RESTAURANTS

##### MOURNE SEAFOOD, BELFAST

Shellfish tops the menu at this homely Irish bistro, which also serves succulent flavoursome fish alongside local craft beers.

34-36 Bank Street,  
Belfast BT1 1HL;  
028 4375 1377,  
mourneseafood.com

##### SHELL BAY SEAFOOD, DORSET

An eatery with a panoramic view out to Brownsea Island that is almost as stunning as the beautiful fresh fish they serve.

Ferry Road,  
Studland, Dorset  
BH19 3BA;  
01929 450 363,  
shellbay.net

##### WATERFRONT FISHHOUSE RESTAURANT, OBAN

This stylish restaurant in the seafood capital of Scotland offers a variety of locally sourced seafood, alongside classic Scottish favourites.

No 1 Railway Pier,  
Oban PA34 4LW;  
01631 563110,  
waterfrontfishhouse.co.uk

## Rachel's choice

### The majesty of French malbec

#### RACHEL WALKER



When Argentinian wine exploded onto the scene in the 1990s, it catapulted malbec to fame. Big and burly, heaving with dark fruit, malbec became associated with gaucho cuisine: the choice accompaniment to hunks of meat, licked with flame, blackened with char.

So it might come as a surprise to learn that malbec originated in a quiet corner of southwest France called Cahors. Winemaking in the region had been chugging away since the ancient Roman era, but in the mid-19th century, just after the first vines arrived in the Andean foothills, Cahors's vineyards were hit by phylloxera: French malbec went into decline, while Argentinian malbec took root.

Now Argentina is home to 75% of the world's malbec vineyards and "Argentinian malbec" rattles off the tongue as easily as "Dijon mustard". But change is afoot. Investors have spotted the potential in Cahors, which is close to Bordeaux, and have ploughed money into reviving French malbec, known locally as *côt* or *auxerrois*. While Argentinian malbec is well established, French malbec is



#### CAHORS CLOS LA COUTALE 2012

The addition of merlot and tannat give real depth of flavour to this red.

It's bursting with tart blackcurrant flavours, offset by a gentle earthiness. £8, the Wine Society



#### JEAN-LUC BALDES MALBEC DU CLOS CAHORS

Rustic and chewy with a farmyard nose and plenty of muscle. Dark bramble and damson notes — a complex and great-value wine. £9, Waitrose



#### CHATEAU DE CEDRE 2011, PASCAL VERHAEGHE

This medium-body red is rich with sour cherry and dark green herbs and laced with a hint of spice. £17, Lea & Sandeman

relatively unknown, which means it's good value for money.

Argentinian and French malbecs are certainly related — they both have big personalities, with a chewy, muscular quality well demonstrated in bottles such as the award-winning Jean-Luc Baldès (top).

The different terroirs throw up individual traits. While hot, dry Argentinian vineyards push fruit to the fore, creating reds rich with plum and bramble notes, French malbec is tannic and earthy; tart flavours such as blackcurrant are typical, as demonstrated in Cahors Clos la Coutale (left) or the sour cherry that runs through Château de Cèdre (above).

As with most big Argentinian reds, French malbec is best enjoyed with food. Instead of slapping a steak on the grill, look to the region's more subtle flavours: game or cassoulet are both great options. Or a traditional dish of pork and prunes might be even more appropriate for this ancient French grape, which is gearing up for its big return ■